

Topics of The Times

NYT

8 Jan 53

Two Rungs Down the Ladder

Speculation on evidence indicating that L. P. Beria has been demoted two places in the Soviet hierarchy suggests all sorts of questions that cannot at present be answered, Mr. Beria and Russia being what they are. Harry Schwartz, who scans news from Russia for this newspaper with a practiced eye, and by putting together bits and pieces of information often is able to assemble—as one builds a jigsaw puzzle—a penetrating picture of some phase of Russian life, reports that Pravda is listing Mr. Beria in sixth place among members of the Politburo instead of in fourth. Whereas the top leaders, four months ago, were listed as Premier Stalin, V. M. Molotov, G. M. Malenkov, Mr. Beria, K. Y. Voroshilov and Marshal N. A. Bulganin, the latest news is that Mr. Beria's name follows that of Marshal Bulganin, two rungs down the ladder.

In Russia a demotion of this sort is a serious business. Unfortunately for us—and for the Russians, too—reporters from Pravda do not descend on Mr. Beria's office to pepper him with questions concerning the significance of his apparent slip. In America, when a Government official obviously is not getting along as well as he might with the Administration, reporters sometimes will knock on his door to see if he is in a mood to discuss his difficulties or grievances, and sometimes it can be learned from the official or from someone close to him that he plans to resign, whereupon reporters write stories saying just that. The readers of Pravda, however, are deprived of such reportorial enterprise, and have to content themselves with counting places in official or semi-official listings: one, two, three, four—what, no Beria?—five, six—ah! Com-

rade Beria has been demoted! There will be no stories in Pravda saying that it is reported reliably Mr. Beria may resign, if indeed he has been demoted. Russian officials seldom resign. They are reassigned, promoted, demoted, or simply disappear.

Some Unanswered Queries

It would be nice to be able to ask Mr. Beria—or any Russian official who finds himself in a similar position—just how he feels about this. Did Mr. Beria know in advance of the issue of Pravda, disclosing his drop from fourth place to sixth, that his name would be listed after Marshal Bulganin instead of after Georgi Malenkov? Did any of his fellow Politburo members say to him privately, "Well, old boy, a bit of bad luck, eh?" Do Mr. Beria's acquaintances still greet him with the respect his position yet demands, or do they seem to say, by a glance or a lift of the shoulder, that Mr. Beria may be going, one of these days, on a little trip?

Does Mr. Beria keep a diary?

and, if so, does he write in it his thoughts on being Number 6 instead of Number 4? Does he write, "This disturbs me deeply," or, "This is of no importance, although I am told that the capitalist press in America, as usual, has been engaging in tiresome and wholly inaccurate speculations as to the meaning. Our great leader, Stalin, has the most excellent reasons for every move, however small * * *." But it is probable that Mr. Beria does not keep a diary, because he is a careful man who knows that diaries can be extremely injurious to the health.

Does Mr. Beria, behind the mask-like face he displays to the photographer, and when alone, fret about his position, much as did the courtier of another age who found one day, after waiting upon the king, that the royal smile once so warm had grown frosty?

Or does he see clearly, perhaps for the first time, how he and his colleagues have created a machine for their own destruction—the end of underhand machinations being evil, force begetting force, and fear begetting fear? Possibly we shall never know how it feels to be a Politburo member, eying one's neighbor uneasily when he is not looking, wondering whether or not one's underlings are doing their job well and considering what might happen if they do not. Unlike Cabinet members and Ministers in other countries, Politburo members find it impolitic to compose memoirs, if, indeed, they are able to attain the serenity of late years from which pleasant eminence memoirs are best written. And, of course, where truth does not speak above a whisper, it hardly needs to be written in a diary.